

**then i saw her face (now i'm a believer)**

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# **then i saw her face (now i'm a believer)**

by [for darkness shows the stars](#)

## Summary

The soft patter of rain against the Little Palace's walls is nearly drowned out by the saccharine, lilting melody. It curls and rises, creeping into every nook and crevice, enveloping them both.

Cozied on a couch to his right, a delicately woven blanket thrown over her lap, his Alina is going through a heavy tome of Grisha theory. It's a familiar book, already ancient when he'd been young. Her brow furrows in concentration as she tries to make head and tail of the complex, archaic text. Watching her, he can't help his lips curving into something sweet and tender that really has no place on the Darkling's face.

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A soft moment in time, before fate tears them apart.

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

His fingers pick over the violin's strings with expert ease. It feels like stretching a muscle. The past few decades, marked by incessant wars, have left him with scant few opportunities to practice this particular craft. A general's work is never done.

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Aleksandr isn't sure he can do something about that. Isn't sure he even wants to.

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He must've been young—very young, so young that the shadows at his fingertips were no more than harmless wisps of inky blackness—when his mother had taken them to live a fortnight in a small and insignificant Otkazat'sya village somewhere high up in the Sikurzoi mountain range. No longer than that—never longer than that.

He cannot recall the name he'd gone by then. There were so many. But it rarely mattered. Very few ever asked. All he remembers is the children's laughter, sweet and melodic, their cheers. He was meant to be reading the heavy tome his mother had left with him that morning before she'd gone off into town. A Shu dictionary, for the journey they were to take there soon.

But the appeal of foreign words and complex calligraphy in darkness paled before them, the Otkazat'sya children, basking in the ardent summer sun. So he left the heavy tome open, and slipped towards the window on silent feet; sneaking like a burglar in his own house.

Well.

Not *his*. Even as young as he was, he'd known better than to attach himself to fleeting things, fleeting *people*. Should have, at the very least. But he'd never been quite so good at keeping himself detached, keeping himself at arm's length as his mother would have liked. It had pained him, once, not living up to her expectations. He's proud of it, now. Proud of the world he's built, even if it's not enough, it will never *be enough*. A general's work is never done, but the Darkling's mission is as eternal as he.

Still. As young as he was, he cared very little for philosophical discussions then. Only the children's laughter, this mysterious and foreign sound.

He'd only meant to watch, really, hidden behind a dusty, gauzy old curtain, drawn in by the laughter, the *light* he couldn't quite comprehend.

.

That's how he feels now, watching her. He is orbiting something warm and bright, something he desperately wishes to understand. A living star.

Something he, swathed in shadows, cloaked in death, bathed in blood, should never want. Should never touch, never taint, never corrupt. But she calls to him like moth to flame. He can't keep away. He doesn't want to.

It's not the Sun Summoner calling to her only true equal. Not Light reaching for its Shadow. It's Alina, calling to Aleksandr, and he is powerless to resist.

The world beyond this room is dull and cold and grey. It's war and desolation, a game of politics and power. It's cold masks and centuries of scheming, doom looming above.

*What is endless?*

Not here, though. Here, in this safe little room, it's just the two of them. For a moment, so brief in the endless expanse of his life, he can forget it all, let it slip through his fingers like sand. Let his mind slow down, think of nothing but the brilliant young woman by his side.

*The universe ...*

He's waited for so long, made so many plans ... but he never could have planned for Alina Starkova. She came like a whirlwind into his life, lit up his darkness like a bonfire and proceeded to cosy herself in a niche somewhere deep within the blackened husk of a heart he didn't know he still had.

*And the greed of men.*

He'd always dreamt of power. Power to make himself known, to make himself into a force so feared no-one would ever dare lay a hand on his people again. When the night was dark and the hearth cold, it was dreams of power that warmed him.

But this? This is a whole another sort of greed, another beast nestled in his chest, ready to devour all in its path. *See me, hear me*, it sings to the oblivious young woman by his side, *know all of me, every sin and depravity, and stay*.

She must feel it too. The connection. The tether. Maybe she doesn't understand what it is, how deep it goes, how inexorably they are bound by fate and power. But she must feel it.

“What are you playing?”

Her voice catches him off-guard. She is looking up at him from her place on the couch, the book closed in her lap, a bookmark peeking out from near the end.

Somewhere in his ruminations, the melody slipped from a court waltz that had been popular eighty years ago, into something dark and ominous, something mirroring *him*.

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The children had all been older than him, with round faces and ruddy, sun-kissed cheeks, but still too young to heed the warnings of their elders, hushed whispers and hissed insults thrown at the strange, beautiful woman and her son who'd appeared out of nowhere with no warning and would disappear just as suddenly without a trace.

Unnatural. *Abberation. Darkling.*

The boy Aleksandr had been knew with stark clarity that *it didn't matter*.

Fleeting things. Fleeting people.

He repeated that *it didn't matter* as their eyes, wide and innocent in a way his had never been turned to him, half-hidden behind a gauzy curtain. They were blind to their parents' apprehension, seeing only another child, slight for his age, with hollow cheeks and empty eyes.

Longing eyes, hungry for warmth and agency and safety in a world that gave his kind none.

And when they asked him to come out of hiding, to play with them, he hadn't known how to explain to them, how to make them understand they *were not the same*.

In the blink of an eye, in a moment, they will be ashes, forgotten, irrelevant, and he will remain unchanged. Immortal. Eternal.

*We are the darkness, and the nothingness, and the void between the stars*, his mother would say, ancient eyes flashing knowingly. *We do not mourn for fleeting things*.

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He does not know how to answer. How to explain to her the darkness within, deeper and fouler than that at his fingertips.

He doesn't like lying to her. He's done it ... astoundingly rarely, actually.

*My name is Kirigan. The Black Heretic is dead. I wish to see the Fold gone.*

But for every lie that left his lips, he'd given her a truth. So many truths, even if she doesn't quite understand their significance, or their true meaning.

*I have been waiting a long time for you.*

*You and I are going to change the world.*

*Call me Aleksandr.*

"I do not know," he admits. "I must have ... wandered off."

She beams, and it's like the sun has broken through the heavy grey clouds, through the rain and the thunder, to shine upon this room, upon her. Upon him, lost in her orbit.

"Saints above," she says, pressing a hand to her heart. "The big scary Black General ... wandering off like that? What would the enemies of Ravka say if they saw us now?"

He doesn't believe in Saints. Grisha revered by the same people who had martyred them, who still oppress and prosecute them do not make a cause for celebration, not to him. And seeing his own eyes stare back at him from icons of Sankt Ilya tends to take the mysticism out of religion.

But her ... oh, her, he could believe in.

"They would say ... that the *famous* Sun Summoner should probably go back to her lessons." He gives a nod to the book in her lap.

And his Alina sticks out her tongue at him. He can scarcely believe it, scarcely *remember* the last time someone had dared. But that's just the thing, isn't it? Even when she was only a lowly cartographer, even with exhaustion and fear evident in every line of her body, she never backed down from him. Never bowed her head, never averted her eyes. She looked upon him, in all his dark glory, and saw ... a person. A man.

"Very mature," he notes, with a teasing grin. He thinks he must have smiled more in the past few months than the four centuries before that. Does she know, he wonders. Does she know the power she holds over him?

"Shouldn't the enemies of Ravka be *glad* I am not studying dull Grisha theory, though?"

"Dull?" he repeats, curving a brow.

"Oh, yes," she says. "Exceedingly dull. This book must be older than the Fold."

"It is."

"See?" She looks far too proud. "No wonder I'm bored."

“Really, now? And what is to be done about that, Miss Starkova?” He carefully sets the violin down onto a polished cabinet. It’s an ancient artefact, older than Alina herself, older than the imbecile tsar and his useless peacock of a tsaritsa.

“Well, I don’t know.” She bats her eyelashes. “If only the world’s most powerful Grisha was in the room here with me to help.”

He chuckles. “And you think *you* are not included in that category, Alina?”

She considers, brow furrowing again. It’s far more adorable than it has any right to be. “The most powerful Grisha who knows what he’s doing, then.”

“Now, now, don’t sell yourself short. You’ve advanced rapidly. May I?”

She nods and scoots over on the couch to make room for him. “Not rapid enough for Baghra.”

Ah. Well. “When is anything enough for Baghra?” he tells her. Nothing he has done has ever been, at least. But now is not the time to ruminate on his mother’s ardent desire to see him and all he’s ever built crumble into ruin.

“Fair enough,” she allows, handing him the book.

The words written over the yellowed pages are strikingly familiar and painfully foreign at the same time. It has been an age since he has bothered with beginner Small Science theory. But for her, he’ll remember. He’ll always remember.

She leans her head on his shoulder as he speaks of *odinakovost* and *etevost*, and he feels the withered husk he calls heart speed up in the hollow cavern of his chest.

Fleeting things. Fleeting people.

But Alina Starkova has never been *fleeting*. She is as eternal and as ethereal as he is. His one true equal.

*See me, hear me, know all of me*, his power sings, rising within him, shadows itching to envelop his Alina, his light, his balance and salvation in a gentle embrace. *Know all of me and do not turn away.*

*I do not think I could bear your scorn.*

## End Notes

let's give it up for the darkling, whose centuries-long plans unravelled before his very eyes because he fell in love with the human embodiment of sunshine, and he simps so hard he can't even seem to find it in himself to care. we lost another soldier today, he will be remembered.

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